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# SARTRE ON STALIN: A DISCUSSION OF *CRITIQUE DE LA RAISON DIALECTIQUE, II*

It was as an independent Marxist of considerable stature and theoretical acumen and with over a decade of political writing and practice that Sartre turned, in 1957, to the project of writing a critique of dialectical reason. Sartre's undertaking is self-consciously set in "the post-Stalinist period", as part of the reconstruction after "Stalinist idealism had sclerosed both epistemological methods and practices".[1] No wonder, then, in the central pages of the second, unfinished volume of the *Critique*, that Sartre brought his genius to bear on the phenomenon of Stalin's ascendancy. His analyses comprise one of the most searching and coherent explorations of the great question: why Stalin? Beginning on page 109 of the 390-page book, Sartre enters a linked series of reflections — always undertaken as examples of other, formal analyses — of the fate of the Bolshevik Revolution, which will last until page 282.

Those who have read the only published section of Volume Two, in *New Left Review*, will recall its main elements. The Soviet Union was in "*mortal danger*: alone, surrounded by strong and hostile powers . . . ."[2] It was a historical monstrosity: "an underdeveloped country moving without any transition from a feudal system to socialist forms of production and property" (II, 119, *NLR*, 152). This contradiction was most sharply posed in the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky, "socialism in a single country" and "permanent revolution". While both leaders were absorbed with the question of the Revolution's vulnerable position, Stalin's main concern was to protect what had already been achieved, while Trotsky was willing to risk its achievements, and to spread it throughout the world.

The situation, Sartre is suggesting, split what had to be kept unified: the successful Bolshevik Revolution *and* the Western proletariat. Trotsky, the intellectual and former émigré, became spokesman and embodiment of the revolution's internationalism and universality but in so doing threatened the very Revolution. Stalin had always, in Russia,

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adapted the émigré leaders' Marxism "to the concrete situation and the actual people who were going to do the work" (II, 111, *NLR*, 145), And so now, he developed measures which (like those of Fidel Castro in Sartre's essays on Cuba) "arose purely from concrete exigencies".

As the victorious slogan of one side in the conflict, "socialism in a single country" absorbed Trotsky's position and said *more* than Stalin alone would have said. It was a response to Trotsky which said both "let us rely on no one but ourselves" *and* "we are capable of building socialism, today". But it was absurd, a monstrous slogan to fit a reality so monstrous that it generated a socialism that was "synonymous with hell". Designed to isolate the Left, it lied about the possibilities of building socialism amidst backwardness and it split what had to be kept unified — Soviet socialism and the Western proletariat — if the Revolution was to succeed.

In transforming specific needs and demands of the present into a long-term theoretical perspective, the slogan also redefined the situation. Whatever socialism originally meant, this monstrous slogan, now become theory, now become guide to praxis, *deviated* it. At the same time, the absurd idea was *made true*. "Socialism in a single country" became clarified as the "socialism" that *precedes* communism, a transitory stage in Soviet development. Thus Soviet socialism: built "under emergency conditions and through continued sacrifice of everything to the most rapid possible increase in the rate of production" (II, 127–8; *NLR*, 160).

## THE DEVIATION OF BOLSHEVISM

With a different formal purpose now in mind, namely to study an integrated group acting upon series — the Bolshevik Party acting upon Soviet society — Sartre now describes how the Bolsheviks sought to create a society "where the worker will have permanent and integral control of the process of production" (II, 132).[3] Collective ownership of the instruments of production, the only possible means to achieve this, must be one of the Revolution's immediate goals.

But urgency led the Bolsheviks to try to create not just a working class but the kind of working class suitable for the needs of *this* situation and praxis. To the question, how to create a general interest in

raising production while keeping consumption down and workers atomized? They answered by inducing competition between them. The leadership widened the salary differential and instituted production bonuses, creating Stakhanovism. Since the general standard of living must be kept low, *everyone* would be given the opportunity to live better — in competition with everyone else.

Among the workers, then, socialism came to mean a competitive and elitist voluntarism, directed by the ruling group. Moreover, the working class formed within "a crisis of growth" is a practico-inert structure, atomized and serialized. But this need to create a specific kind of working class had a decisive repercussion among the ruling group: that it must itself *occupy* the highest rung of the hierarchy, not merely of power, but also of honor and salary. What a striking paradox, then, "that a group of poor revolutionaries, without privileges, refusing every title — as was Lenin — could, for the needs of praxis, engender a society of dignitaries where merit is pompously rewarded" (II, 146). Thus does revolutionary praxis develop, and become enveloped by, its own counter-finality: without intending to do so "it transforms its agents into *dignitaries*" in trying to save the Revolution. Stratification is produced as "the *process* of praxis" (II, 146). Praxis produces a practico-inert field which fulfills its goals, but creates new demands on further praxis which *deviate* it from its original goal. The most striking fact about deviation is that it involves a change in the group itself. The leadership was "transformed by the entire society and with it, when they stopped being revolutionaries to become dignitaries of the Revolution" (II, 154).

Sartre pungently captures the meaning of the leadership's praxis towards the workers: "to destroy these workers as free practical organisms and as common individuals, to be able to create man from their destruction" (II, 162). Thus a working class had to be created, in a massive demographic upheaval, and a surplus squeezed from it — both of which necessitated keeping it as an impotent seriality, often through police-state techniques.

Was there an alternative to this inherently oppressive and destructive course? Sartre notes that "it would be possible to conceive of a praxis which is centralized, hard, authoritarian but supported (and now at last, controlled) by the managed themselves; reciprocally, the managers

would have taken more care to find and to suppress abuses if these developments had been demanded in the name of a common voluntarism by a working class of which they had been sure" (II, 167—8). Workers' pressure "could have, indeed, tended to suppress bureaucratic excesses and to limit the hierarchy" (II, 168).

Sartre dismisses this alternative to Stalinism projected by many Marxists[4] as an abstraction which forgets the reality of industrialization and demographic upheaval. Stalin sought "to lay the bases of a true socialist community by a considerable effort to raise everyone's cultural level" (II, 163). Deeply committed to industrial growth, driven to the maximum exertion, the Soviet workers are given a very specific freedom: the space for advancement offered by Stakhanovism. The Soviet masses are proud of the first great achievements of Soviet industry, which do not however increase the level of consumer goods available to them. They are passive towards their supervisors not only because they are impotent, but also because they deeply believe that it is industrial growth, not changing specific managers, that matters most. "Soviet man" is indeed "the first to *really* define the present from the future (and on the base of the past) and his individual future from the socialist future . . ." (II, 174).[5]

## COLLECTIVIZATION

To be sure, the peasantry is not included within this increasingly positive portrait. Originally an autonomous practico-inert zone wholly outside of Bolshevik praxis, the illiterate and backward peasantry mortally threatened the Soviet Union by 1928. To speak of the "grain strike", implying consciousness, organization, intention, reflects the leadership's incorrect grasp of the nature of this danger. In the Manichean world-view accompanying Bolshevik praxis, any resistance is perforce seen as praxis, and, to the degree that it threatens socialism, *as* produced by counter-revolutionary groups. Now the sovereign seeks to unify the peasantry to meet the threat: but from the outside, by coercion and, we might add, against itself.

The result is collectivization, doubling the state's ability to requisition crops, suppressing the kulaks and beginning the socialist transformation of the countryside. But under the urgent conditions of 1928 the scarcity

of time led to *forced* collectivization without the anticipated prerequisite number of tractors or years of education and modernization. The brutal policy created, on the one hand, huge collective farms dominated by the authorities and, on the other, groups of peasants united in resistance to the dominant praxis, sometimes even led by genuine counter-revolutionaries. The ferocity with which the peasants were suppressed incarnates the "scarcity of time" which in turn reflects the urgency of the foreign and internal threats, as conditioned by under-development. The foreign threat demands rapid industrialization, but *there is not enough time* to develop consumption industries; the lack of tractors demands forced collectivization and *there is not enough time* to educate the peasantry. "It is *through* the struggle against the peasants that the dictatorship will radicalize itself everywhere and in every sector as Terror; it is through this terror — which requires a consolidated power — that the improvised hierarchy little by little becomes sclerosed" (II, 189).

## TERROR

Terror will turn inward on the "sovereign organs" themselves. As such, it is the same as external terror, a mode of "radical unification of practico-inert diversities". Its intelligibility lies in the sovereign's need to drive out its *own* passivity, to make itself the rigorous and inflexible *unity* of its practical field by first making itself "pure unifying power". But since passivity is *always* present, the sovereign must continue attacking it. The leaders "must be as one" *in order to* apply the Draconian measures required by rapid industrialization, but in doing so, they may discover that they are indeed *several.* Thus the logic of terror is rooted in the dialectic of praxis itself.

## STALIN

Sartre now turns to Stalin himself. He is concerned to demonstrate that every event in the Soviet Union under Stalin "is defined in relationship to the sovereign praxis and as singular determination of the unified practical field" (II, 200). On the one hand Sartre is talking about, and illuminating, a totalitarian society where *everything* is treated as part of

a larger praxis. On the other he is returning to his theme that Stalin alone proposes solutions "which are *required* by the circumstances" (II, 207) rather than by the needs of an ideology. Both lines of thought lead to the question: why Stalin?

Sartre emphasizes, in general terms, the Revolution's need to turn to a *sovereign individual.* "If in the organisms of dictatorship, the sovereign is *an individual* (a *common* individual), it is because the type of integration demanded by their praxis and by their objectives can only be realized and guaranteed by abandoning, to the advantage of one alone, the powers of each one" (II, 209). His power and effectiveness are drawn from the fact that the leading groups, frozen into impotence by inertia, turn to him as "the only one through whom this serialization can be dissolved and the groups reconstituted" (II, 209).

Stalin is the *being* who is everywhere — as leader, as observer watching everyone at work, as Soviet society "in a single person." *He* is the indissoluble unity of the vast multiplicity which is the Soviet Union: "His millions of portraits are only *one* portrait; in each dwelling, in each office, in each work-place, he realizes the presence of all the others, under form of synthetic milieu and of inflexible surveillance" (II, 243). Although Sartre suggests that the unity thereby achieved is the deceptive one of serial recurrence, he also emphasizes that the "cult of personality" is *more* than deception: we might say that it achieves *the only possible* unity under the conditions of seriality described earlier.

But because the enormous effort of construction demands that the Soviet Union "find its unity in the biological indissolubility of one individual" there is no way to eliminate the particular idiosyncrasies of *this* individual and instead achieve an abstract objectivity of praxis. Whoever became sovereign, the Revolution would inevitably, in its faults, in its excesses, have become "this individual in person". The individual called for gives more or less than the situation calls for; the Revolution turns to a single individual to unify it but becomes individualized *according to his idiosyncrasies.*

We can imagine a sovereign individual who would have done precisely what was needed, neither more nor less, but only *imagine.* Sartre caps this discussion with a marvelous passage:

> And probably if the *process* of planned growth could have been directed by an angel,

praxis would have the maximum unity joined to the maximum objectivity. The angel would never be blind, nor spiteful, nor brutal. It would do in each case whatever it is necessary to do. But for this reason, angels are not individuals; they are abstract models of virtue and wisdom. In a situation the real individual, ignorant, worried, fallible, flustered by the brusque urgency of perils, will react (according to his history) at first too softly, then, at the point of being overwhelmed, too brutally. These jerks, these accelerations, these brakings, these hairpin turns, these violences which characterize Stalinism, were not all required by the objectives and the demands of socialization. However they were inevitable insofar as this socialization demanded, in its first phase, to be directed by one individual. (II, 220)

In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that the Party leaders would turn to the man who shared their past as militant in Russia. This representative of Russian particularism,

believing in *dogmas* and mistrusting *theories*, penetrated with the particularity of the problem of socialism in Russia (. . .) convinced that no Western conception could have found a field of application in this complex country, assured *both* of the technical and cultural inferiority of the Russians in relation to other Europeans and of their *human* superiority (of energy, courage, endurance, etc.), it is indeed as patient militant, slow of mind, tenacious, wanting to progressively discover the Russian truth, that he found the necessary alliances in the Party and even in the masses to get rid of the theoreticians of the Right and Left who were opposed in the name of the same universality. (II, 223)

Based on objective reality inasmuch as the Revolution was in danger, suspicion became vigilance against traitors who might hurt the effort to catch up and meet the threat. "But this mistrust, as interior consequence of singularization, is exactly one of the habitual conducts of Stalin, that is on the basis of his history" (II, 224). Moreover, the Revolution will turn to Stalin insofar as it must abandon its principles. It leans more heavily on the dogmas it does not apply even while keeping them distant. It will then seek to place itself in the hands of a "dogmatic opportunist". To integrate the Party it also demands a "militant known by militants", someone who, to impose enormous demands on workers and peasants, must be "inflexible, without nerves and without imagination". "Finally by the very fact that the experience is *singular*, he has to adapt action *to singular circumstances* without any but a formal reference to principles . . ." (II, 226). These demands must become the sovereign's personal qualities.

Does this mean that Stalin was called for in his most singular traits, right down to "the determinations which came to him from his environ-

ment, his childhood, the *private* characters of his adventure (for example going to the seminary, etc.)? Was *this former Georgian seminarian* really necessary" (II, 226)?

Stalin's toughness, his inflexibility, can indeed be traced to social contradictions which are "among the fundamental factors of the Russian Revolution; more exactly, the child by his rough childhood and by the violence of his revolt incarnates and singularizes the practical totalization which constitutes this moment of Russian history" (II, 226). The crisis of 1928 demanded inflexibility on the sovereign's part, but "this demand leaves undetermined the question of the individual origins of this inflexibility" (II, 228). An infinity of childhoods might have produced the quality required — but this implies that it could never be *precisely* the required inflexibility. If it had been engendered *directly* by the praxis demanding it, it may have been the precise quality and quantity needed. But insofar as it came from elsewhere, "its practical objectives cannot originally be the difficult construction of a new society and the very situation which requires it implies that it is not *adapted to its task* but only more or less disadapted" (II, 228).

Once society turns to a sovereign individual, *it* becomes individualized in *him* and his personal peculiarities are decisive. Scarcity is an "iron law" here as elsewhere; the exact inflexibility is not only not readily available, it may not be available at all. In the case of Stalin the situation required Russia to turn in on itself but not its "absurd cultural isolation"; the great difference between Western and Soviet standards of living "*proposed* the 'Iron Curtain'; but it did not *demand* that [the Russian worker] be lied to endlessly about the condition of the European worker" (II, 233).

## STALIN'S ANTISEMITISM[6]

In the five years before Stalin's death "his praxis becomes a monstrous caricature of itself" (II, 246) especially with his turn to antisemitism. Stalin, and Marxism as well, would denounce seeing Jews as a race who as such are driven to evil, to anti-social or anti-Soviet behavior. Stalin's antisemitic actions are rather based, in Stalin's eyes, on the *political* problem of integrating Jews into the Soviet Union. The permanent danger posed by the real foreign ties of many Jews with the capitalist

enemy — with a Zionism heavily influenced by American Jews and thus the United States, with the capitalist West — "all this represents for Stalinist mistrust not even a *possibility* of infiltration but the real presence of a core of traitors (. . .) within" (II, 276—7).

In response Stalin restricts whatever may strengthen their particularity as Jews and unite them with foreign Jews against other Soviet citizens — Yiddish language and culture, for example. And yet his policy had to be contradictory: kept from being Jews, they are persecuted *as* Jews. By Stalin's last years this policy led to virulent antisemitic measures.

## SARTRE'S ACHIEVEMENT

Now that entire interpretation is before us, we can appreciate its full power. Even twenty-five years later it ranks as one of the most impressive analyses yet made of the Bolshevik Revolution's success and degeneration[7], and above all, their interdependency. Having begun by showing that what underlay the process was the original inspiring Bolshevik vision, and not some crude lust for power, Sartre ends by depicting its agent, Stalin, as reawakening the depths of Russian barbarism in outliving his own historical usefulness. *Deviation* is Sartre's key analytical theme and historical insight. He describes a praxis-process in which "these men have become other men occupied in attaining other objectives by other means: and they do not even know it" (II, 248).

Another of Sartre's major achievements is to show Bolshevism-Leninism-Stalinism as being a single praxis unfolding *and* being created in situation, in the process changing hands and deviating according to the new vicissitudes its agents had to confront. Stalinism was Bolshevik praxis in *that* situation. In correctly stressing this half of the story Sartre avoids the retrospective wishful thinking of all those critiques of Stalinism and even Bolshevism[8] — which insist that there was a "better way" to accomplish the same goal.[9]

Abstractly and objectively speaking, there were any number of "better" policies to follow after 1921 than the reality of NEP, followed by forced collectivization, followed by overnight industrialization, followed by the Terror. But, as Sartre helps us to understand, there was

a logic leading *that* leadership, having *those* commitments, to follow *those* policies which they saw as the most appropriate response to *that* situation.

## SARTRE'S LIMITATIONS

Although he helps us to see this, Sartre does not adequately stress that Party was changing drastically by 1929. If the Revolution's praxis was to become hierarchical, unprincipled and brutalized, it was finding its appropriate agents by replacing and destroying its original ones. Those in leadership were not those who had led the Revolution. A political struggle took place whose political side Sartre almost totally neglects, and was waged less in terms of the correct praxis to follow than in terms of the prior process of Stalin's gathering the strands of power into his hands. While Trotsky and Bukharin were mesmerized by their Marxist concern for the proper "fit" between policies and the Soviet Union's social base, Stalin knew where power lay and went after it. Sartre's single-minded focus on Bolshevik praxis causes him to miss its great tragic irony: the liquidation of most of the Bolsheviks by what in fact became a wholly new Party.

## THE REVOLUTION GONE MAD

The second limitation of Sartre's analysis lies in its gentleness. Sartre never mentions the concentration camps into which perhaps one in every ten Soviet citizens entered during Stalin's lifetime, the massive scale of death under collectivization, the physical destruction of the Party and transformation of the Revolution into the barbaric cult of Stalin. What, after all, was the reason why one in ten people died[10] as socialism was being constructed?

I can only touch on the answer here but have developed it at length in *The Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope.* It begins with the fact that *those* leaders with *those* commitments in *that* situation felt the subjective and objective need, by 1929, to undertake a systematic and radical rupture with reality. This rupture included a genocidal attack on Old Russia itself, a mad effort to industrialize overnight, pitching the country into terror, and the creation of socialism as a grotesque

amalgam of fantasy and reality. Insofar as Sartre touches upon these themes at all, he lays them at the door of Stalin the *individual*: the disasters result from his personal idiosyncrasies, factors which are thrown into the bargain when the ruling group turns to a personal sovereign.

But Sartre was wrong: the irrationalities were social, stemming not from biography or idiosyncrasy but *from the situation into which the Soviet Union was pitched after 1929.* Stalin conveyed this in a prophetic speech, delivered in 1931: "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it or they crush us."[11] Of course, Stalin was correct, to the year. In responding to the demands of an impossible situation, Stalin drove the Soviet Union to do the impossible. It was a mad project[12], because it radically violated all historically known possibilities of development. If it was accomplished, and it was, this happened only because a mad rupture with reality — expressed in paranoia, fantasy and extreme brutality, as well as in inconceivable achievement — became a decisive principle of the new society.

## SARTRE'S PROGNOSIS

In the end, does Sartre place the possibility of change which would recover the promise of Bolshevism in an optimistic or a pessimistic light? If we adhere to his main line of thought, we cannot be very sanguine. The discussion of deviation suggests that not only has a very different Soviet Union been built than the one originally intended but that, above all, those who have built it and their children think of themselves and their project very differently than did the first Bolsheviks. With their stake in the bureaucratic domination of Soviet life and the hierarchical organization of the working class, Stalin's heirs can scarcely be regarded as comrades.

Yet at a decisive point in the analysis, after describing the creation of Socialist Man, Sartre reflected on the situation in 1958 and anticipated the possibility of a positive outcome to the Revolution's deviation. An increasingly conscious working class reflects that Stalinist praxis is accumulating "transformations which deny it; and this negation is returned to it through new generations of workers" (II, 176). This very

project of negation "is explicitly contained in sovereign praxis as one of its long-term objectives" (II, 176). Once they are made explicit "the demands of the masses would be a first control exercised on the sovereign *in the name of its own projects and of the praxis which realizes them*" (II, 175).

Sartre's optimistic projection is based on the fact that the sense of its *temporary* character was built into the bureaucracy's very consciousness at its formulation. It existed only for the "interim". "It could build the USSR but not construct a class: their action itself forbids them doing this in spite of the privileges it confers" (II, 177). But if the bureaucracy has prepared this emancipation of Soviet workers, will it not be swept away by it? Only circumstances will decide how rapidly or violently this reform is carried out. And above all Sartre insists it will be "in the framework of a *reformist praxis*". Not a non-violent one, to be sure, but one which accepts the basic achievements of the Bolshevik Revolution, and even of Stalinism, as its starting point.

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, I: *Théorie des ensembles pratiques*, Paris, 1965, 166; trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, London, 1976, 50.

[2] *Critique de la raison dialectique*, II: *L'intelligibilité de l'histoire*, Paris, 1985, 109. The only part of *Critique*, II to be published in Sartre's lifetime, this discussion first appeared in *New Left Review* No. 100, (November 1976-January 1977). This quotation appears there on p. 144.

[3] In Volume One Sartre had posed the question explicitly about the "real problem" of the future:

> to what extent will a socialist society do away with atomism *in all its forms*? To what extent will collective objects, the signs of our alienation, be dissolved into a true inter-subjective community in which the only real relations will be those between men, and to what extent will the necessity of every human society remaining a detotalized totality maintain recurrence, flights and therefore unity-objects as limits to true unification (I, 413; trans., 307)?

[4] Indeed, it is the direction developed by Trotskyists as an alternative, and can rightly claim its intellectual inspiration as *The Platform of the Joint Opposition*, London, 1973.

[5] See Sartre's discussion of why socialism has a privileged status *vis-à-vis* capitalism in *Le Fantôme de Staline, Situations*, VII (Paris, 1965), p. 148; trans. Irene Clephane, *The Spectre of Stalin*, London, 1969, p. 4.

[6] Following Yehuda Bauer, I use *antisemitism* rather than *anti-Semitism*. The point is to avoid making it appear to be a principled position taken against a philosophy like

"Semitism" when it is in fact the hatred of a people. See *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective*, Seattle, 1978, p. 8.

[7] The most recent overview of such efforts is Moshe Lewin, 'Grappling with Stalinism', in *The Making of the Soviet System*, New York, 1984.

[8] For a discussion of them in the context of an interpretation of Stalinism see my *The Dialectics of Disaster: A Preface to Hope*, London, 1984, 64—136.

[9] See *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[10] The figure is highly debatable, and certainly requires further research to verify. Presently, however, twenty million deaths is the estimate of the most complete and carefully researched analysis of the scope of Stalinist terror; cf. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*, New York, 1968.

[11] Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, New York, 1967, p. 328.

[12] I develop the basis for using *madness* to describe social policy in 'Social Madness', Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Walliman, *The Age of Genocide*, New York, 1986.

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